

## SECTION 9

### - PSYCHOSOCIAL WORKFORCE SUPPORT SERVICES -

An influenza pandemic has the potential to result in high numbers of ill persons and many deaths. Besides the obvious toll on individuals and families, the health care system and other community services will also be greatly stressed. Past experience in disasters show that, for all members of the community, there is an increased risk of mental health and substance abuse (or 'behavioral health') problems related to emergency events. The need for behavioral health disaster response services will continue for the duration of the pandemic and for a lengthy period of time afterwards.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) Center for Emergency Preparedness (CEP) is working closely with MDPH's Bureau of Substance Abuse Services (BSAS), and the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health (MDMH) to provide disaster behavioral health services for all residents of the Commonwealth. Two ways in which disaster behavioral health services can be provided by MDPH and MDMH are through behavioral health disaster responders (or 'crisis counselors'), and MassSupport. These two services are discussed in greater detail below.

#### 1. Behavioral Health Disaster Responders

Behavioral Health Disaster Responders, or 'crisis counselors,' provide a short-term intervention with individuals and/or groups experiencing disaster stress during and after an emergency event. Behavioral Health Disaster Responders do not provide traditional behavioral health treatment – rather, they provide an immediate supportive response that includes an assessment, a brief intervention, and follow up care. A behavioral health disaster response may include components of the following:

- Assessment of: safety; level of distress; immediate concrete needs.
- Psychological First Aid - the stabilization of affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses to disaster stress.
- Transition to additional services (e.g., mental health, social services and/or substance abuse treatment; concrete services including financial aid, housing/shelter and food resources).

A behavioral health disaster response is available for individuals, families and communities affected (directly or indirectly) by emergency events. In addition, since everyone who experiences an emergency is affected, counselors are available to all staff responding to an event. A behavioral health disaster response can prevent or mitigate the consequences of secondary trauma, 'provider burnout,' and behavioral health problems that are known to affect emergency personnel.

Through Boston Medical Center's Center for Multicultural Mental Health, MDPH and MDMH are providing behavioral health disaster responder training courses throughout the Commonwealth to develop a cadre of these volunteer responders who would be deployed by MDMH through ESF-8 during a disaster. More information on these training courses can be found here: <http://www.cmmh-cmtp.org/services-bhdrtp-trainingdates.php>

#### 2. MassSupport

MassSupport offers aid in three distinct ways:

- (1) a website <http://www.mass.gov/samh/>;
- (2) a toll-free 24/7 help line number - 866.237.8274; and
- (3) print materials that can be downloaded or requested.

The **website** has links to state and federal government agencies and includes material on *Common Reactions to a Disaster* and *Coping with a Disaster*. In addition, individuals may access a database that contains resources and contact information for various government agencies, relief organizations, inter-faith groups, and behavioral health providers.

The **toll-free 24/7 help line**, which has interpreter and TTY services available, will connect callers to staff who can provide information on relief and behavioral health services. In the event of a large-scale disaster, the help line can be enhanced by having trained behavioral health disaster responders available to answer telephone calls.

The available **print materials** include a Family Disaster Plan and Family Emergency Card that can be downloaded or sent to individuals. Being prepared before a disaster strikes is one of the best ways to make your family and home safer.

### **3. Activation/deployment of these resources**

Various protocols exist for the activation and deployment of these resources. MDPH and MDMH are working to develop a state disaster behavioral health plan, which will complement the Commonwealth's Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan. It is proposed that a review-ready draft of the state disaster behavioral health plan will be completed by April 2006.

### **4. Crisis Management Group Associates**

MDPH has a current contract with Crisis Management Group Associates (CMGA) to function as MDPH's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) (<http://cmgassociates.com/mdph/mdph.html>).

The mission of CMGA, as it pertains to its role as the MDPH's EAP, is to promote, establish, and increase good health towards a quality work and personal experience for MDPH staff. In this role CMGA assists MDPH staff with internal and external stressors that can impact one's overall health and ability to perform one's job duties at optimum capacity.

CMGA is developing their own Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP), so that in the event of an influenza pandemic CMGA can still provide services to MDPH employees.

In addition, CEP has enhanced the role of CMGA, so that CMGA can assist the MDPH's Director of Behavioral Health Planning and Development in organizing the Behavioral Health Response in an emergency event; assessing the amount and type of Behavioral Health Services needed; providing administrative and clinical consultation to the Behavioral Response Team, and some debriefing sessions for crisis counselors.

### **5. MDPH behavioral health skill-building course**

MDPH is working with CMGA to develop a 'behavioral health skill-building course' for MDPH staff. Public health professionals, in the course of providing necessary public health interventions, often interact with affected individuals, families, medical providers and others in the community during a disaster. Understanding the 'normal response to an abnormal situation' allows public health professionals to be better prepared to mitigate the effects of a disaster. Developing skills to respond appropriately to people in distress can save time, reduce additional strain on those already traumatized, and help build relationships to support disaster-related public health functions.

While the targeted audience is MDPH staff who have a high volume of contact with the public (e.g., epidemiologists, public health nurses, and health educators), courses will also be open to other MDPH staff as well as staff from local boards of health throughout Massachusetts. This course is proposed to commence in March 2006. A course manual and corresponding train the trainer course will be offered so that this material can become part of routine training for all public health staff.